

WHY A CONFESSION
OF FAITH?

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BIBLICAL CONFESSIONS OF FAITH

In Deuteronomy 26 vv. 1-19 two liturgical confessions of faith are recorded. Verses 1-11 set forth an ancient confession. The heads of the families of Israel when they entered the Promised Land were to express their faith thus: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; but there he became a great, mighty and populous nation. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us and imposed hard labour on us. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction and our toil and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and wonders; and He has brought us to this place, and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey". In their ancient creeds the Israelites loved to tell what God had done for them.

Most New Testament commentators consider that I Tim. 3:16 contains a fragment of one of the Church's earliest confessions of faith. "The rhythmical and antithetical phrases suggest a quotation from an early credal hymn". (*"The Christ-hymn"* - Ridderbos)¹

In Romans 10:9 we have the confession of one's personal faith, "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation".

As reforming Baptist congregations in this Commonwealth we are in good scriptural company when we express our Faith in a confessional way as did both the Ancient and the New Testament church. We also emulate the Reformed Churches of Europe by expressing our faith through a confession; for without this we cannot state in precise terms what we believe.

As local churches, we are confessing communities and attempt to convey the Truth we hold to the people in our neighbourhoods. We elucidate this message for all men through the '1689 Faith to Confess', and so endeavour to fulfil the great commission given by the Master: "...go...teach all nations...". Matt. 28:19-20.

THE HISTORIC CONFESSIONS OF FAITH

When attempting to state our faith in simple terms there is a problem of language since we have a God who transcends both intellect and perception.

The purpose of a confession however, is to state biblical doctrine in the plainest and most applicable way possible to contemporary man. The cardinal tenets of our Faith are set out in the historic creeds and confessions in an appropriate order and with a clarity that would be difficult to surpass today.

Take for example Article 18 of the 1559 French Confession of Faith, concerning Justification, it reads:

"We believe that all our justification rests upon the remission of our sins, in which also is our only blessedness, as says the Psalmist (Ps. 32:2). We therefore reject all other means of justification before God and without claiming any virtue or merit, we rest simply in the obedience of Jesus Christ, which is imputed to us as much to blot out all our sins as to make us find grace and favour in the sight of God. And, in fact, we believe that in falling away from this foundation, however slightly, we could not find rest elsewhere, but should always be troubled. Forasmuch as we are never at peace with God till we resolve to be loved in Jesus Christ, for of ourselves we are worthy of hatred".

Consider also chapter 31 of the 1689 Confession. How clearly and simply the state of man is set out both after death and in resurrection.

The historic confessions not only served to consolidate and clarify the Truth through the centuries but form a guide for us today. However, a weakness of some of the older confessions is an understandable pre-occupation with the errors of Rome.

HOW THE BAPTIST CONFESSION OF 1689 CAME INTO BEING

Crises in the Church saw the Almighty raise up men peculiarly suited to their task. They were singularly gifted men who possessed a deep and abiding faith that was tested by times of trouble and persecution. Their dedicated work often extended into years of consecrated study and debate. In many cases they were ornaments of the Church, of lasting name and reputation, whom their brethren in the Faith recognised and thrust the commission upon them. Such stalwarts as these forged those tools for instruction and confession which the Church has used ever since. So permanent were their labours that little, if any, improvement can be made to the clearest statements of our Faith, like the deity and humanity of our Lord Jesus, the sacred Scriptures – for they were moulded in the fires of controversy!²

Between the years 1644 and 1648 an Assembly of Puritan Divines of England and Scotland had drawn up the Westminster Confession of Faith. Its

church order was that of Presbyterianism, and Baptists differed from it on important matters such as the nature of the gathered church, baptism, the Lord's Supper and church government. Hence, when opportunity arose, they drew up their own Confession of Faith, accepting the fundamental doctrines of the Westminster Confession but making such adjustments to, and corrections of, that Confession as seemed to their minds and consciences to be demanded by the pure Word of God. Thus a comparison of the two will reveal many word for word similarities, but also several changes.

In those things wherein Baptists differ from their Presbyterian brethren, they sought to express themselves with candour and plainness, and in such a way that there was respect for those from whom they differed.

A dozen years after the Baptist Confession was drawn up by persecuted ministers a new era of liberty dawned, and in 1689 thirty-seven leading Baptist ministers re-issued the Confession, known in history as the '1689 Confession'. In England and Wales it became the definitive Confession of the Calvinistic churches and remained so for the next two hundred years.

CONFESSONAL BANKRUPTCY TODAY

Every denomination in Europe, America and Australasia was and is currently affected by what C.H. Spurgeon called the "Downgrade Controversy". Good men of that era were prepared to compromise their position, often unintentionally, for peace and harmony within the denomination to which they belonged. Whole colleges forsook the old paths and embraced the new knowledge, worshipping at the shrine of evolution, biblical criticism and new methods of evangelism.

The decline at Spurgeon's Tabernacle after the pastor's death demonstrated on a small scale the departure from the old truths which has taken place throughout the world.⁴ Iain Murray writes: "...when the distinctive doctrinal emphases were lost following Spurgeon's death in 1892, enormous changes took place at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Until comparatively recently the new system of teaching and practice bore hardly any resemblance to the old. When the Metropolitan Tabernacle was destroyed for the second time, by enemy bombing in 1941, the 1689 Confession of Faith was found beneath the foundation where Spurgeon had personally laid it in 1860.

Yet in 1941 there was no influential congregation in England known to stand for the theology which that document contained; nor was there any College preparing men to preach that Faith".³

Hulse comments: "The trenches and fortresses of the old Calvinism having been abandoned, the fragmented evangelical army took up new lines of defence, aiming to preserve the fundamentals of the faith. Fundamentalism lined up against Liberalism. In the face of overwhelming superiority of scholarship, resources and numbers, fundamentalism has been forced to retreat and in nearly every major denomination liberalism is dominant. As a whole, fundamentalism represented by evangelicals is now seriously compromised with ecumenism, especially in co-operative enterprises. To complicate the situation, cults have multiplied and like great ugly weeds, deface the garden of religion, being strong and virile in their assertion of errors: while the struggling pale plant of evangelicalism finds it difficult to blossom when there is little nourishment!"⁴

Contemporary emphasis on methods, music and special items has abounded at the expense of expository preaching. Dr. M. Lloyd-Jones, in his book "Preaching and Preachers", tells of a personal incident when visiting an American church. His usual 40-50 minute sermon was that day cut off the air as it had been crowded out with preliminaries.⁵

The result of the "Downgrade Controversy" is evident in every State of the Commonwealth. The latest confirmation was furnished during the 1979 NSW Baptist Union Assembly's meetings, when the inerrancy of the sacred Scriptures was challenged by almost half its delegates. That the inerrancy of the sacred Scriptures was grudgingly affirmed reflects a new and unbiblical spirit among Union Baptists. The present apostasy within Baptist Union churches will not be arrested whilst its ministers and members are unwilling to define doctrinal issues precisely. It can be appreciated why a 'Mini-Confession' is all that is required to become a member of such churches.

My recent experience as a Study leader in a Beach Mission team causes me to believe that only decline faces Australian Churches unless there is repentance for the watering down of the formulas set by our Puritan and Reforming forefathers and a hearty re-affirmation of the Faith once delivered to the saints as set out in the great Confessions. It appears that many congregations among us have no foundation in the Word of God. Their leaders foolishly think that they can revive such churches; so they will become a force for righteousness on this Continent. They fail to apply our Saviour's words to themselves, when He said: "And every one who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended and the floods came and the winds blew, and burst against that house and it fell and great was its fall", Matt. 7:26-27.

If doctrine is lightly esteemed we need not be surprised if Confessions are

less so. Nevertheless, to be fair, it must be stated that there are many sincere Christians who value clear biblical teaching, but who feel that confessions no longer are relevant in today's world.⁴

THE RELEVANCE OF THE CONFESSION OF FAITH FOR TODAY

Most evangelicals are not complacent about winning souls to Christ but they fail for the most part to see that our responsibility in winning the lost extends to all strata of society. Great sections of our community have never heard the gospel.

Dr. Nigel Lee, in a booklet illustrating the relevance and usefulness of the Westminster Confession of Faith today, asserts that our Western society is increasingly hostile to the confession of Christ. He then goes on to describe our contemporary scene thus:

1. **Affluent** – living standards are at an all time high
2. **Highly mechanized** – the technological age has led to over specialization and consequential appalling superficiality
3. **Undisciplined** – strong anti-authoritarian trends are observable in homes, schools, universities and nations
4. **Godless** – the consideration of God is absent in business life, civil life and the mass media. God could well be dead, for society is without God. Dr. Lee shows how the Westminster Confession states biblical truth in a way which is highly relevant to this generation.⁶

The 'god' to whom modern man looks is 'science'. He expects that, given time, his god will solve the problems of life for him. Yet the Philosophy of Nihilism is permeating the Secondary school system. The cultural media, the Film industry appears to be working at full pressure to produce films of apocalyptic horror, doom and despair.

So great is the battle for men's minds in our society that the Confession of Faith is of vital importance in the spread of the Truth, provided it is governed according to the Scriptures.

THE CASE FOR THE CONFESSION OF FAITH TODAY

Firstly – A credal statement is of great usefulness as an instrument of instruc-

tion. (We distinguish between two forms: 1. The Confession of Faith which has 32 Articles of Faith in Modern English, and 2. The Catechism which takes the form of question and answer and ranges over the essential doctrines of the Faith and aims at the solid instruction of the young.

Secondly — It is the basis of fellowship among churches. The Apostle's Creed is widely accepted as such a base. But in a narrower compass the '1689 Confession' fulfils a role in drawing and holding together churches and men who believe the Christian Faith as understood in the Augustinian and Reformed tradition. This is not a union of those who agree to differ but of those whose hearts and minds profess cordial loyalty to the great statements of the Faith. Such confessors reject Arianism, Pelagianism, Romanism, Socinianism and Arminianism. They acknowledge, unashamedly, the Deity of their Lord, the Sovereignty of God and the inerrancy of His Holy Word. Indeed, one may say it is a Confession of true biblical ecumenism!

Thirdly — A Confession of Faith is necessary because it records the growth and progress of the Church's hold upon and grasp of the Word of God. We could almost say that today we can scarcely ask any theological question or face any heresy which has not been propounded and debated somewhere down through the centuries.⁷

Fourthly — The very structure of the confession is in itself a reminder that the most logical and effective way of teaching and preaching is by a method that is consecutive and expositional in character. Weakness in the ministry and Sunday School teaching are reflected in evangelical churches where only the 'Fundamentals' are taught. The Confessional assembly has all that the 'Fundamental' assembly professes and more because they are Augustinian and Calvinistic.

Fifthly — The Confession is useful in helping those who are coming into a knowledge of the doctrines of the Reformed Faith generally; it will assist their understanding of the significance of the local church and one trusts, help them into its fold. Church members should make it their aim to have a working knowledge of the Confession. Children who come into membership ought to have a good understanding of the Catechism.

Sixthly — All elders and deacons should not only understand the doctrines of the Confession but also enthusiastically propagate them. It is expected of elders that: **"(they) may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict"**, Titus 1:9b.

When elders are ordained and deacons appointed they should publicly sign a local church document stating they will uphold the Word of God and be

loyal to the subordinate standard, affirming, as far as understood by its agreement with Holy Scripture, the Confession as their personal faith!

In Summary – A Confession is necessary because it serves as a standard of Truth, so that any erroneous teaching within an Assembly can be discovered, identified and dealt with by the elders. It, along with the Scriptures, must be the basis of any investigation so that ecclesiastical discipline may be carried out. The Confession is therefore a touch-stone, a measuring rod, a form of unity which also demonstrates and designates error and heresy.²

CATECHETICAL INSTRUCTION OF THE YOUNG

As it was the responsibility of the fathers in the Ancient Church for the spiritual instruction in the home, so it is today. Deut. 6:5-7, “**And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up**”. It is the duty of Christian parents to be settled in the doctrines of the Faith. It will enrich their minds, be a lamp to their feet and to their children’s feet, introducing the little ones to the spiritual world, widening their vocabulary (and probably help them to read aloud clearly and well).

The Catechism will furnish them with an armour of proof for creation and a weapon against the theory of evolution. It will prove a bulwark against several deviations from normal behaviour which are insidiously being postulated in the secular State school system. Through the careful and tactful teaching of the Scriptures and the Catechism one may confidently expect in the coming years to see a growing number of children coming to faith in Christ Jesus, being baptized and entering into church membership.

DO WE REQUIRE A NEW CONFESSION OF FAITH FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

As Baptists we are fortunate that our 1689 Confession of Faith has been re-written in modern English. This was undertaken by Carey Publications Ltd. of the United Kingdom. Mr. S.M. Houghton of Charlbury, Oxford, England was invited to re-write the Confession in modern style while retaining the exact sense of the original. The reviser is one of the most important men in Britain behind the re-publication of Reformed Literature in the last two decades, a man to whom the Banner of Truth Trust paid tribute on his recent 80th birthday.⁸

Whilst it ever remains true that the Holy Spirit has more light to break forth from His Word, the fundamental doctrines of the Faith could be expressed in no other way than the way in which they are set out in the Confession at present. One has observed over many years the struggles modern translators of the Bible have had attempting to make relevant to our technological age certain biblical words and phrases. In the main they have failed to improve upon many of the words and phrases found in the older versions of the Bible.

Any new Confession would only be an updated one with additions; which hopefully would deal with contemporary issues such as gross materialism and the prevailing heresies. However, it is to be feared that as there is a divergence of opinion today within any confessional main-line denomination that a new confession would result in the lowest common denominator as the standard of expressed truth. Such a confession would be weak and ineffectual, reflecting the broad spectrum of contemporary theological thinking. It would not be a worthy successor of those produced during the Reformation period. Indeed, one doubts that it would survive to the end of the century! In this ecumenical climate what kind of a Children's Catechism would emerge from such a Confession?

To set about additions to the present Confession would require an ecclesiastical body to examine and determine what ought to be added to the Confession. Five areas would require consideration:

1. The sect of the Jehovah's Witness
2. The sect of the Mormons
3. The resurgence of Islam and the revival of Eastern mystic religions
4. The theory of Evolution
5. The Charismatic Movement.

However, for all but a small portion of our work, the present Standards are adequate.

OBJECTIONS TO THE CONFESSION OF FAITH

Many evangelicals make bold assertion that they need no creed but Christ! They boast of their independence from any ecclesiastical or church control. Yet it is tragic that we have so many who think so little of the great credal heritage of the Church. However, those who so boast, usually have an immensely inferior creed of their very own manufacture.² Is it any wonder that we

have so many theologically defective 'full-time' workers abounding in Australia today. All such people would profit from a working knowledge of any one of the great confessions of faith, compiled by Divines whose motto (although perhaps unwritten) was 'Sola Scriptura'.

To those who object to a confession of faith, we reply that our confession serves to strengthen the life of the church. It recognises that the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and obedience. One may ask would it not be better to dispense with any subordinate standard and simply state that we believe the Bible? The world is full of religious teachers contradicting one another in the most radical way, all claiming to teach the Bible, so that to say one believes the Bible is to say almost nothing. Accordingly, it is necessary that one declares by a Confession of Faith, what one believes to be the only and authoritative message of the Bible.

The late Dr. Campbell Morgan, in his book "The Gospel according to Mark", pp.162-163, asserts "No man who is living in true fellowship with God will consent to be mastered mentally by any creed that ever yet has been prepared. The proportion in which a man knows the high life of fellowship with God, is the proportion in which he knows that no creed his brother may write for him, can be final. No man or company of men, no Church living in true fellowship with God will consent that its polity be stereotyped, or will confuse form with power, or life with the method of its expression."

Warren Wierbe in his helpful paperback "Walking with Giants"⁹ states: "There is one interesting thing about Morgan's preaching that I have never seen discussed anywhere - his seeming avoidance of the doctrinal epistles. He was basically a preacher of the Four Gospels, but he never expounded, verse by verse, the great doctrinal epistles ... he was basically a devotional preacher, not a doctrinal preacher". It can be appreciated in the light of the foregoing why Campbell Morgan, a master pulpiteer of his day, ignored as unimportant that which gave the Puritans and their successors their strength - a confessional framework in which they delighted to minister. Contrary to Morgan, they found no tedious restrictions therein. By contrast with Dr. Morgan, it can be sustained by those who have studied the ministry of C.H. Spurgeon that the Truths made clear in the 1689 Confession characterized the doctrinal content of his preaching!⁴

In many denominations today, the subordinate standard has been relegated to Archives. In its place there has arisen the tyranny of Christian or ecclesiastical opinion. Within the Union Baptist churches of this Continent there has been a real curtailment of ministerial freedom - that the doctrines of grace, if preached at all, must be preached with the utmost tact and caution if one is to retain even the tolerance of one's congregation. Many over the

last decade have been elbowed out of these churches for preaching the doctrines of grace and teaching that for which the Baptist forefathers earnestly contended - the 1689 Confession of Faith.

The Confession is the buttress of ministerial freedom. It declares to the local ministerial fraternity and the calling congregation that that preacher will proclaim those doctrines enshrined in the Confession, for that is his Magna Carta!

CONCLUSION

Yet in an age when synods and assemblies of the Christian Church are profligately abandoning themselves to even greater displays of apostacy and unbelief, we have a solemn duty to bear witness to the Faith once delivered to the saints as hammered out and burnished in the systematic and schematic form of our Confession.

As many congregations are reforming and new ones are coming into being it is essential that serious attention be given to the place of the Confession in their life and ministry.

By this Confession we declare our resolve to propagate no other gospel than that message of redemption in Christ Jesus, revealed in Holy Scripture and confessed by the Church through all ages and with particular clarity and completeness by the Churches of the Reformation.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED

- Arianism** — Arius maintained that God the Father alone is eternal and Christ was created out of nothing as the first and greatest of creatures. He in turn created the universe.
- Arminianism** — God elects on the grounds of foreseen faith. Christ died for everybody, though only those who believe will be saved. A man may be saved and then lost. The individual decides for Christ.
- Augustinianism** — Augustine set forth with clarity and a faithfulness to the Scriptures the major doctrines of the Word. His writings greatly influenced John Calvin.
- Apocalyptic** — The word means unveiling. An apocalypse is a book containing real or alleged revelations of events that will attend the end of the world.
- Calvinism** — That system of Truth expounded from the Old and New Testaments as the self-authenticating revelation of God in Christ.

Down-Grade Controversy – The down-grading of every doctrine of Scripture to a humanistic level, and the controversy it caused and is still causing in evangelical churches. It commenced circa 1870.

Ecumenism – A movement for church union fostered by the World Council of Churches - a Council more politically and socially motivated than spiritually minded.

Fundamentalism – A movement in theology in recent decades designed to conserve the principles which lie at the foundation of the Christian Faith.

Inerrancy – A belief founded upon the Word of God that the original Scriptures (in Hebrew and Greek) are accurate and without error in all they affirm.

Liberalism – A system rooted in philosophic idealism: it places unreserved trust in the critical method of studying the Scriptures; it believes that modern science has antiquated much of the Scriptures and seeks to harmonize Christianity with modern learning.

Nihilism – Negative doctrines; a total rejection of current beliefs in religion and morals.

Pelagianism – Pelagius denied original sin. Man can live an upright life if he so wills. Pelagianism knows nothing of redemption.

Socinianism – A deviation from orthodox Protestantism which denies the full deity of Christ. Salvation is gained by 'works'.

Most of these definitions may be found in Baker's Dictionary of Theology.